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# Measuring attitude toward writing: A new tool for teachers

*Teachers can use this attitude  
survey instrument to learn how to  
help their students write better  
and enjoy writing more.*

**T**he emphasis on writing instruction has increased in recent years. A survey of schools participating in the 1992 National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing assessment found that priority was given to writing instruction in three fourths of the fourth-grade classrooms and two thirds of the eighth-grade classrooms (Applebee, Langer, Mullis, Latham, & Gentile, 1994). Additionally, the NAEP results indicated that students were being asked to write more than at the time of the 1988 assessment. Other sources have documented the increase and changes in writing instruction. In schools promoting the writing process, students have been encouraged to take ownership by selecting topics of personal interest (Atwell, 1987; Graves, 1983). In both writing process and traditional programs, students are taught strategies to develop their level of competence as writers. Spaulding (1992) noted that when students see themselves as incompetent writers a lower level of engagement will occur in their writing.

The increase in writing activities has presented teachers with the challenge of determining their students' attitudes toward writing because of the link between motivation and literacy learning (Turner & Paris, 1995). However, there is a conspicuous lack of valid and reliable affective assessment instruments available for classroom teachers and researchers (Bottomley, Henk, & Melnick, 1997/1998). Our purpose was to develop an easily accessible instrument that teachers and researchers could use for either group or individual administration to learn about

students' attitudes toward writing, which they can then compare to those of age and grade peers. If we are more knowledgeable about students' attitudes toward writing, then our writing instructional practices can potentially benefit from this new information. For example, Bottomley, Henk, and Melnick (1997/1998) developed the Writer Self-Perception Scale (WSPS) to measure a student's perception of his or her own writing. While the instrument is useful only in Grades 4, 5, and 6, it does give teachers information concerning students' feelings about their own writing.

Knudson (1991) created the Knudson Writing Attitude Survey for Children, a 19-item survey, to be used in Grades 4–8. Items were rewritten to adapt the vocabulary, not content, in the surveys for Grades 1–3 (the Knudson Writing Attitude Survey for Primary Grades, 1992), and Grades 9–12 (the Knudson Writing Attitude Survey for Grades 9 to 12, 1993). All three Knudson surveys can supply information about individual students' attitudes toward writing. Since the surveys do not have norms, teachers can make only limited comparisons within an individual class. The format of the surveys also can lessen individual students' attention and interest in completing the survey.

This article provides an overview of the development of a new Writing Attitude Survey, directions for using the survey, suggestions for application in classrooms and research studies, and a reproducible copy of the survey with a scoring sheet.

## Development of the scale

Several important criteria were identified to guide the authors in developing this instrument. We agreed that the survey would have to (a) have a sufficient number of student participants to create appropriate norms, (b) consist of items based on psychometric properties, (c) have reliability and validity derived empirically, (d) be applicable for Grades 1–12, (e) provide a response format attractive to students, and (f) be appropriate for group administration within a short period of time. As identified earlier, the Writer Self-Perception Scale was useful only in Grades 4–6. Knudson's surveys, while covering the full K–12 grade range, lacked a format that would be attractive to a wide range of students, and, most important, lacked norms that would allow classroom teachers the opportunity to compare their students' attitudes toward writing with others at the same grade level.

Many of the procedures used by McKenna and Kear (1990) to develop and norm the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS) were used in the development of the Writing Attitude Survey. Jim Davis, the creator of the Garfield cartoon character, and Paws Incorporated, the copyright owner, supplied camera-ready pictures of Garfield displaying emotions ranging from very happy to very upset. Davis granted permission for the pictures to be published in a survey that would be reproduced and used by educators. A copy of this survey is included with this article (see pp. 16–23).

The possibility that students would select a neutral response was avoided with an even number of choices (Nunnally, 1967). Again, the use of 4 points to measure students' attitudes was patterned after the ERAS. The decision to continue the use of a 4-point scale was based on research that found that young children can discriminate no more than five pieces of information simultaneously (Case & Khanna, 1981; Chi, 1978; Chi & Klahr, 1975; Nitko, 1983).

We developed 54 items that were used in the pilot version of the instrument. These items were written after reviewing instruments developed by Knudson (1991, 1992, 1993) and screening college-level textbooks used in language arts methods classes for ideas that could be used in statements about writing. Each statement was worded with a uniform beginning, "How do you

## Technical aspects of the Writing Attitude Survey

The final\* norming sample consisted of 974 students in Grades 1–12 who completed the Writing Attitude Survey during the spring 1997. To allow for confident generalizations, the survey sampling procedure included 19 school districts across three NAEP assessment regions of the U.S. (east, central, and west). There were comparable numbers of males ( $n = 509$ ) and females ( $n = 465$ ) in the sample. Proportions of African Americans and Hispanics were within 4% of the national proportion for each grade. Total sample proportions for ethnicity were Caucasians = 75.7%, African Americans = 16.0% and Hispanics = 8.3%\*\*

Percentile ranks for total scale scores at each grade level are presented in Table 1. Individual students' scores can be compared with the national sample in the same manner as achievement-test percentile ranks.

\* Some subjects in the initial sample were randomly deleted so that the ethnic make-up approximated the U.S. distributions for each grade.

\*\* African American and Hispanic distributions are slightly higher in the school population than for the total U.S. population.

feel..." to establish a consistent expectation on the part of the students.

The prototype instrument was then administered to a sample of 223 students in Grades 1–12 in several school districts in the midwestern U.S. In addition to completing the survey, students and teachers were asked to write comments that would help the authors improve the clarity of an item or the usefulness of the instrument. Five separate analyses were conducted on the sample data, and 28 items of high reliability were identified.

The revised 28-item instrument was administered during late February and early March 1997 to a sample of 1,503 U.S. students in Grades 1–12. Estimates of reliability and evidence of validity were based on this national sample. A description of the technical aspects of the survey appears in the Sidebar.

## Administering and scoring the survey

The Writing Attitude Survey (WAS) is designed to be administered individually or to an entire class in only a few minutes. Because the final raw score will be converted to a percentile rank based on norms, the directions given to the students must follow the procedures used with the norming group. Directions for use accompa-

**Table 1**  
**Midyear percentile ranks by grade and scale**

Raw score	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
112	98	98	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
111	98	98	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
110	98	98	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
109	98	97	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
108	97	97	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
107	97	96	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
106	96	96	99	98	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
105	95	95	99	98	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	99
104	95	94	99	98	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	98
103	94	93	99	97	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	98
102	93	93	98	97	99	99	99	99	99	99	99	98
101	92	91	98	96	98	99	99	99	98	99	99	97
100	91	90	97	95	98	99	99	99	98	99	99	97
99	90	89	97	95	97	99	98	99	98	99	99	97
98	89	88	96	94	97	99	98	99	97	99	99	96
97	87	87	96	93	96	99	97	99	97	99	98	96
96	86	85	95	92	96	99	97	99	96	99	98	94
95	84	83	94	90	95	99	96	99	96	98	98	93
94	83	82	93	89	94	98	96	98	95	98	97	92
93	81	80	93	87	93	98	95	98	94	97	97	91
92	79	78	91	86	92	97	94	98	94	97	96	89
91	77	76	90	84	90	97	93	97	93	96	95	88
90	75	74	89	82	89	96	92	97	92	95	95	86
89	73	72	87	80	87	95	90	96	90	94	94	85
88	70	70	86	78	86	95	89	95	89	93	93	83
87	68	67	84	75	84	94	87	95	88	92	91	81
86	65	64	82	73	82	93	86	94	87	90	90	79
85	63	62	80	71	79	91	84	93	85	90	88	76
84	60	59	78	68	77	90	82	91	83	88	87	74
83	58	57	76	65	75	89	79	90	82	86	85	72
82	55	54	74	62	72	87	77	88	80	84	83	69
81	52	52	71	59	69	85	75	87	78	82	81	66
80	49	49	69	56	66	83	72	85	75	80	79	63
79	46	46	66	53	63	81	69	83	73	78	76	61
78	44	44	63	50	60	79	66	81	71	75	74	58
77	41	41	61	47	57	77	63	79	68	73	71	55
76	39	38	58	44	54	74	60	76	66	70	68	52
75	36	36	55	41	51	72	57	74	63	67	66	49
74	33	33	52	38	48	69	54	71	61	64	63	46
73	31	31	49	35	44	66	51	68	58	61	59	43
72	29	28	46	32	41	63	48	66	55	57	56	40
71	26	26	43	30	38	60	44	63	52	54	53	37
70	24	24	41	27	35	57	41	60	50	51	50	34
69	22	22	38	25	32	54	38	57	46	47	46	31
68	20	20	35	22	29	51	35	54	44	44	43	29
67	18	18	32	20	27	48	32	50	41	41	40	26
66	17	17	30	18	24	44	29	47	39	37	37	24
65	15	15	27	16	21	41	27	44	36	34	34	21
64	13	14	24	14	19	38	24	41	33	32	31	19
63	12	12	23	13	17	35	22	38	31	29	28	17
62	11	11	20	11	15	32	19	35	28	26	26	16
61	10	10	10	10	13	29	17	32	26	23	23	14
60	08	08	17	08	12	27	15	29	24	21	21	12
59	07	08	15	07	10	24	14	26	22	18	19	11

*(continued)*

**Table 1**  
**Midyear percentile ranks by grade and scale (continued)**

Raw score	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
58	07	07	13	06	09	22	12	24	20	16	17	09
57	06	06	12	05	08	19	10	21	18	14	15	08
56	05	05	10	05	07	17	09	19	16	13	13	07
55	04	04	09	04	06	15	08	17	14	11	11	06
54	04	04	08	03	05	14	07	15	13	10	10	05
53	03	03	07	03	04	12	06	13	12	08	09	05
52	03	03	06	02	03	10	05	12	10	07	07	04
51	02	02	05	02	03	09	04	10	09	06	06	03
50	02	02	04	02	02	08	03	09	08	05	05	03
49	02	02	04	01	02	07	03	08	07	04	05	02
48	01	02	03	01	02	06	02	07	06	04	04	02
47	01	01	03	01	01	05	02	06	05	03	03	02
46	01	01	02	01	01	04	02	05	05	02	03	01
45	01	01	02	01	01	03	01	04	04	02	02	01
44	01	01	02	0	01	03	01	03	03	02	02	01
43	01	01	01	0	01	02	01	03	03	01	02	01
42	0	01	01	0	0	02	01	02	03	01	01	01
41	0	0	01	0	0	02	01	02	02	01	01	0
40	0	0	01	0	0	01	0	02	02	01	01	0
39	0	0	01	0	0	01	0	01	02	01	01	0
38	0	0	0	0	0	01	0	01	01	0	01	0
37	0	0	0	0	0	01	0	01	01	0	0	0
36	0	0	0	0	0	01	0	01	01	0	0	0
35	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	01	01	0	0	0
34	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	01	0	0	0
33	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
32	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
31	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
30	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
29	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
28	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

ny the instrument. The directions adhere closely to the procedures for the ERAS (McKenna & Kear, 1990), the first attitude measurement to incorporate the Garfield character in a Likert scale. First, the purpose and a brief overview of the survey should be shared with the students. Students in Grades 1 and 2 are to complete the survey as a group with the teacher reading the items aloud. If the teacher monitors the class, Grades 3 and above can complete the survey as a group without the items being read aloud.

When the surveys are ready to be scored, point values are assigned to the circled Garfield for each question. The "very happy" Garfield is assigned a score of 4. The "very upset" Garfield receives a score of 1. The response value for each Garfield will be summed with the highest

possible total being 112 (28 items  $\times$  4). Using the percentile rank by grade (see Table 1), the total score can be converted to a percentile. A record sheet accompanies the instrument, which can be used to record student information, item responses, raw score, and percentile rank.

### Using the survey

Collecting data about students' attitudes toward writing is meaningless unless the information is used to plan instruction. Scores on the WAS can be helpful in planning instruction; however, it is important to know the limitations related to application of the survey results. Additionally, several examples of ways to use the WAS in classroom planning are offered.

**Table 2**  
**Descriptive statistics and internal consistency measures**

Grade	N	M	SD	SeM	Alpha*
1	69	80.25	14.65	1.76	.85
2	55	80.45	14.95	2.02	.85
3	112	73.31	13.69	1.29	.85
4	50	77.96	13.06	1.85	.85
5	55	74.76	12.42	1.67	.86
6	159	67.81	12.51	.99	.87
7	55	72.73	12.47	1.68	.87
8	108	66.92	12.56	1.21	.88
9	55	70.15	14.34	1.93	.93
10	89	69.80	12.06	1.28	.88
11	80	70.06	12.47	1.39	.88
12	87	74.45	13.27	1.42	.91
All	975	72.31	13.75	.44	.88

\* Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951).

*Strengths and limitations.* A quantitative estimate of a student's attitude toward writing is provided in the percentile rank. Because the survey provides only one global score, it cannot be used to identify causes for poor attitudes or to identify specific instructional strategies for classroom implementation.

A strength is that the instrument achieved a high degree of reliability. Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951), a measure of item relatedness (internal consistency) was calculated at each grade level for both genders, as well as for the total sample. Reliability coefficients ranged from .85 to .93 and are presented in Table 2. Note that no coefficient fell below the .80 level, and reliability for the total sample was .88.

Content validity has been demonstrated through the construction of the instrument. Items were developed based on consulting sources as discussed earlier.

*A classroom plan.* The summary results should be used to support and confirm other data about students' attitudes toward writing. During the first few weeks of the school year, a teacher might administer the WAS to all of the students. By calculating a class average raw score and then using the chart to convert this score to a percentile rank, the teacher would be able to compare the class with the national norm for that grade level and score. A class average at or above the national norm (i.e., the 50th percentile rank) might indicate that this group of students has rel-

atively positive attitudes toward writing compared with their peers. A class average below the national norm might suggest that the teacher investigate more closely the reasons for this score. The low class average might be related to consistently low performance in writing by the class, poor development of specific writing skills, or perhaps just a lack of experience with writing.

If a teacher suspects that low attitude scores are the result of poor writing ability, the specific areas of writing deficiency should be identified and remediated. On the other hand, if the poor attitudes seem to be caused by limited writing experiences, the teacher should increase students' opportunities for structured and independent writing experiences. Further, the instrument may be used to (a) provide an initial indicator of a student's attitude toward writing, (b) give a pre- and postmeasurement score of attitude toward writing, (c) collect an attitudinal profile for a class or group of research participants, or (d) serve as a way to monitor the impact of an instructional program in writing.

As an example of how class averages might be used, Michelle Adler, a third-grade teacher, gave the Writing Attitude Survey as a pre- and posttest measurement while implementing a new writing program in her classroom (Adler, 1998). The writing program included children's literature to teach the six traits of writing included in the Six Trait Analytic Scoring Guide (Spandel & Stiggins, 1997). By using the survey, Adler

was able to collect data to support the implementation of her program.

Scores for individual students may indicate a need to explore their backgrounds in writing beyond this survey. This objective could be addressed through structured interviews based on a series of questions about writing. To find out about the writing of individual students, Carol Block, a fifth-grade teacher, wanted to follow the writing progress of three students with learning disabilities in her classroom (Block, 1998). As part of her data analysis, Block gave the WAS as a pre- and posttest measurement to the entire class; however, she was particularly interested in any changes in attitude on the part of the students with learning disabilities. While two students showed consistent scores for the pre- and posttest, one student's scores increased dramatically. Block would not have known this without giving an attitude measurement.

## A final word

As children move from grade to grade, their attitude toward writing generally worsens. Knudson's research (1991, 1992, 1993) also found that younger students have more positive attitudes toward writing than older students.

This long-range decline in positive writing attitudes parallels changes in other academic areas, especially reading (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). Many factors undoubtedly play a part in this trend. For example, children must eventually come to realize that writing, good writing in particular, is effortful. In addition, many of their experiences with writing may involve tedium, lack of choice, and negative feedback. For these reasons, teachers face an uphill battle as they attempt to foster positive writing attitudes in their students. We believe that this battle can be won. Effective teaching strategies and engaging opportunities to write successfully can make real inroads in student perspectives. We offer the WAS to teachers for whom writing is a priority, as a tool for monitoring the affective growth they strive to instill.

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## Writing Attitude Survey

### Directions for use

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The Writing Attitude Survey provides a quick indication of student attitudes toward writing. It consists of 28 items and can be administered to an entire classroom in about 20 minutes. Each item presents a brief, simply worded statement about writing, followed by four pictures of Garfield. Each pose is designed to depict a different emotional state, ranging from very positive to very negative.

#### **Administration**

Begin by telling students that you wish to find out how they feel about writing. Emphasize that this is not a test and that there are no right answers. Encourage sincerity.

Distribute the survey forms and, if you wish to monitor the attitudes of specific students, ask them to write their names in the space at the top. Hold up a copy of the survey so that the students can see the first page. Point to the picture of Garfield at the far left of the first item. Ask the students to look at this same picture on their own survey form. Discuss with them the mood Garfield seems to be in (very happy). Then move to the next picture and again discuss Garfield's mood (this time, somewhat happy). In the same way, move to the third and fourth pictures and talk about Garfield's moods—somewhat upset and very upset.

Explain that the survey contains some statements about writing and that the students should think about how they feel about each statement. They should then circle the picture of Garfield that is closest to their own feelings. (Emphasize that the students should respond according to their own feelings, not as Garfield might respond!) In the first and second grades read each item aloud slowly and distinctly, then read it a second time while students are thinking. Be sure to read the item number and to remind students of page numbers when new pages are reached.

In Grades 3 and above, monitor students while they are completing this survey. It is not necessary for the teacher to read the items aloud to students, unless the teacher feels it is necessary for newer or struggling readers.

Teachers should review the items prior to the administration of the survey to identify any words students may need defined to eliminate misunderstanding during completion of the instrument.

#### **Scoring**

To score the survey, count four points for each leftmost (very happy) Garfield circled, three points for the next Garfield to the right (somewhat happy), two points for the next Garfield to the right (somewhat upset), and one point for the rightmost Garfield (very upset). The individual scores for each question should be totaled to reach a raw score.

#### **Interpretation**

The scores should first be recorded on the scoring sheet. The scores can be interpreted in two ways. An informal approach would be to look at where the raw score falls related to the total possible points of 112. If the raw score is approximately 70, the score would fall midway between the somewhat happy and somewhat upset Garfields, indicating the student has an indifferent attitude toward writing. The formal approach involves converting the raw score to a percentile rank by using Table 1. The raw score should be found on the left-hand side of the table and matched to the percentile rank in the appropriate grade-level column.

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# Elementary Writing Attitude Survey

Name\_\_\_\_\_ Grade\_\_\_\_\_ School\_\_\_\_\_

Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

1. How would you feel writing a letter to the author of a book you read?



2. How would you feel if you wrote about something you have heard or seen?



3. How do you feel writing a letter to a store asking about something you might buy there?



4. How would you feel telling in writing why something happened?



Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

5.

How do you feel about spending free time reading?



6.

How would you feel keeping a diary?



7.

How do you feel writing poetry for fun?



8.

How would you feel writing a letter stating your opinion about a topic?



Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

9.

How do you feel if you were an author who writes books?



10.

How do you feel if you had a job as a writer for a newspaper?



11.

How do you feel about becoming an even better writer than you already are?



12.

How do you feel about writing a story instead of doing homework?



Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

13. How do you feel about writing a story instead of watching TV?



14. How would you feel writing about something you did in science?



15. How would you feel writing about something you did in social studies?



16. How do you feel if you could write more in school?



Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

17. How do you feel about writing down the important things your teacher says about a new topic?



18. How do you feel writing a long story or report in school?



19. How do you feel writing answers to questions in science or social studies?



20. How do you feel if your teacher asked you to go back and change some of your writing?



Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

21.

How do you feel if your classmates talked about making your writing better?



22.

How would you feel writing an advertisement for something people can buy?



23.

How do you feel keeping a journal for class?



24.

How do you feel writing about things that have happened in your life?



Please circle the picture that describes how you feel when you read a book.

25.

How do you feel about writing about something from another person's point of view?



26.

How do you feel about checking your writing to make sure the words you have written are spelled correctly?



27.

How do you feel if your classmates read something you wrote?



28.

How do you feel if you didn't write as much in school?



# Elementary Writing Attitude Survey Scoring Sheet

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Administration Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Scoring Guide

4 points	Happiest Garfield
3 points	Slightly smiling Garfield
2 points	Mildly upset Garfield
1 point	Very upset Garfield

Item scores:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

6. \_\_\_\_\_

7. \_\_\_\_\_

8. \_\_\_\_\_

9. \_\_\_\_\_

10. \_\_\_\_\_

11. \_\_\_\_\_

12. \_\_\_\_\_

13. \_\_\_\_\_

14. \_\_\_\_\_

Item scores:

15. \_\_\_\_\_

16. \_\_\_\_\_

17. \_\_\_\_\_

18. \_\_\_\_\_

19. \_\_\_\_\_

20. \_\_\_\_\_

21. \_\_\_\_\_

22. \_\_\_\_\_

23. \_\_\_\_\_

24. \_\_\_\_\_

25. \_\_\_\_\_

26. \_\_\_\_\_

27. \_\_\_\_\_

28. \_\_\_\_\_

Full scale raw score . . . . . \_\_\_\_\_

Percentile rank . . . . . \_\_\_\_\_